Statement to the Congressional Forum on Iraq

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Thank you for the invitation to testify regarding the current situation in Iraq. I will offer some observations about the nature of the violence that still plagues that country, current trends in that violence, and the relationship inside Iraq between politics and security.

The violence that has raged for more than three years and that is known loosely under the label of "the Iraqi insurgency" is, and always has been, a multifaceted phenomenon. Any explanation for it, and any prescription for dealing with it, that attempts to reduce it to a single cause or to a single category of protagonists will inevitably be inaccurate. "Dead-enders" or others associated with the former regime have been a part of it, but only a part and a lesser part at that.

Foreign extremists, and specifically radical Islamists, certainly have been attracted to—and inspired by—the disorder and violence in Iraq, which for them has become the latest and most prominent jihad. The foreigners have played a significant role in some of the more spectacular attacks such as large car-bombings and in suicide operations. But they have never constituted more than a modest minority share of the insurgents. Moreover, the organizational lines between Iraqis and non-Iraqis have

become increasingly blurred. The organization assembled by the most prominent of the foreign jihadists, the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had already become mostly Iraqi in its membership by the time of Zarqawi's death earlier this year.

Most participants in the insurgency are neither Baathist dead-enders nor foreign jihadists, but rather Iraqis driven to violence by a variety of nationalist or communal motives. Some, though not all, would subscribe to Islamist ideology. Many are upset by the continued occupation of Iraq by foreign troops, three and a half years after the overthrow of the old regime. Nearly all are upset by the continued lack of security, lack of stability, lack of reliable services such as electricity, lack of prosperity, and lack of hope for appreciable improvement in this state of affairs in the foreseeable future.

The character of the violence, in terms of both perpetrators and targets, has evolved over time. To the extent that elements associated with the Baathist regime have played any significant role, it was mostly in the early months of the insurgency, when they had the advantage of being in-country with some degree of organizational infrastructure in place. Later the foreign extremists, attracted by the violence, made their way into Iraq in sufficient numbers to increase their role.

Most recently, the violence has assumed a more sectarian character. While coalition forces continue to be an attractive target—and Zarqawi's successors have called for intensified efforts to attack American troops—an increasing proportion of the killing has been Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence in which the victims evidently were chosen because of their ethnic or religious identities. This has been most clearly the case with incidents such as bombings of mosques, but it almost certainly is true as well of most of the individual victims whose corpses appear at the Baghdad morgue and elsewhere.

The internal violence is primarily perpetrated by Sunni Arabs against Shia Arabs and vice versa, particularly in the religiously mixed Baghdad area. But it also includes violence between Kurds and Arabs, as well as between rival militias, with the militias being the effective authority in many Iraqi cities. There has been such inter-militia violence between rival Shia groups in southern Iraq, for example.

There has been much discussion in the United States about the degree to which the current troubles in Iraq could have been avoided through better execution and smarter occupation policies by the United States. While there is no doubt that major errors have been made during the occupation that have contributed to the current situation, I believe that much of what we are seeing today—and especially the sectarian conflict—was an almost inevitable consequence of forcibly removing Saddam Hussein. The sudden removal of the dictator uncorked ambitions and resentments that had been seething for decades. The Shia had been a long-oppressed majority who, once given the prospect of climbing to the top of the heap, became determined to do exactly that and have had little incentive for compromise. The Sunni Arabs, fearful of the consequences of losing their formerly dominant position, are understandably reluctant to place their trust in any process that depends on the reasonableness of other groups. And the Kurds have never surrendered their ambitions—frustrated at the Versailles conference almost a century ago—for independence, as well as for control over most of the northern oil resources.

Debates about whether Iraq is already in a civil war I do not find very enlightening and ultimately are matters of semantics. Although to most Americans the term “civil war” conjures up images of Fort Sumter or Manassas, to those who study the Middle East a more apt comparison is the Lebanese civil war that dragged on through the

late 1970s and most of the 1980s. The current violence in Iraq already is very much like that civil war, which consisted largely of inter-militia battles and street violence conducted against the backdrop of a complicated ethnic and sectarian mosaic.

The prognosis for improvement in the current situation over the next year or two is not bright. Sectarian violence has a self-reinforcing quality, in that each incident increases the resentment and desire for revenge that can lead to still more incidents. Meanwhile, the general lack of security, stability, and prosperity sustains discontent in the larger population. And in another vicious circle, the violence—by impeding almost every aspect of economic growth and reconstruction—perpetuates the conditions that underlie the discontent.

Progress on the political front in Iraq, and in building effective Iraqi institutions, is essential over the long term in improving the security situation. In the shorter term, however, some of this very institution-building has produced additional sectarian points of contention. The dominance of particular groups in elements of the security forces—in particular, Shia dominance of the police—has been one such problem. Most recently, Shia moves to erect their own autonomous region have intensified opposition from Sunni Arabs who fear being left to fend for themselves in a section of the country that lacks oil.

The dynamics I have described present few good options for outsiders, including coalition military forces, to ameliorate the situation significantly. Although in the short run the presence of these forces may lessen the chance of the sectarian strife escalating to still higher levels of violence, it clearly has not prevented it from reaching significant levels already. In the longer run, that presence is unlikely to resolve the underlying conflicts of interest among communities within Iraq—conflicts that may reach some

semblance of stability only after the Iraqi protagonists have exhausted themselves in a trial of strength that, as in the case of Lebanon, might last for several more years. In the meantime, as with any civil war, any outsider—however noble his intentions—faces the prospect of antagonizing one side or the other by appearing to take sides in the conflict whatever he does.